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Empowering Our Ministry: How Unbelief Got Started

Philippians 2:5-6

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(a) This morning I want to address how unbelief got started. This is important to understand because we live in a culture where belief systems are largely in disrepute. That is, we all breathe a cultural air which presumes that miracles don't happen. Since we all live in the same culture, we all breathe this air, we all are immersed into the same assumptions, we all are skeptical of things we can't see or touch or prove. And, of course, this means that we are a people who find the notion of the power of the Holy Spirit a bit uncomfortable. It's not that we are willing to say God won't do some miraculous thing, as much as we wouldn't consider it - it's not likely because such things just don't happen. And so, if I continue to preach about the Holy Spirit, and don't deal head-on with our culture of unbelief, then we're prone to leave here educated but not committed.

I'd argue that unbelief assumed its present status as a fully available option in American culture in the 1880's. That didn't mean then that belief had lived out its allotted career. It doesn't mean that unbelief had driven out belief. What it meant was that by the 1880's, unbelief had become one readily available answer to the question, What about God? Roughly prior to the 1880's, the notion that believing in God was a matter of personal choice would have sent every serious thinker spinning in their graves. We are still trying to digest this change more than 120 years later. Unbelief has transformed the hopes, aspirations, purposes, and behavior of millions of unbelievers, and has affected believers almost as remarkably. Wrangling over prayer in public schools is only one minor eruption, as is the collective misunderstanding of the phrase 'separation of church and state.' The change in belief is much more profound. It has affected the tectonic plates on which our culture moves. You see, the very option of godlessness has dis-integrated our common intellectual life, both in formal disciplines like philosophy, science, and literature and in those informal habits of mind by which we, as a culture, experience and order our world. God used to function as a central explanatory concept. As cause and purpose, the idea of God shaped and unified natural science, morality, social theories, psychology, and political thought into one loosely assembled approach to understanding humankind and the cosmos into which we have been placed. Disagreement raged in every corner of intellectual life, and there were great and terrible perversions of life in the name of God, like the Spanish Inquisition and the Salem Witch Trials, like the Crusades and the mutual killing of Catholics and Protestants in England. But at the most fundamental level, God provided the frame of an agreed-upon universe in which to argue.

The book I mentioned last week that I am having Elders on Session read begins with this same recognition. For the sake of convenience, and because the scope of that book is not a tracing of the deep historical roots of unbelief, they fancifully date the beginning of unbelief to sometime on a Sunday evening in 1963. Where were you in 1963? The authors of that book were in Greenville, South Carolina. There, on the particular Sunday, the Fox Theatre opened for business, in defiance of the state's time-honored blue law forbidding businesses to open on the Lord's Day. The authors note that seven of them - regular attenders at the Methodist Youth Fellowship at the Buncombe Street Church - made a pact to enter the front door of the church, be seen, then quietly slip out the back door and join John Wayne at the Fox Theatre.

From the perspective of these two authors, that evening has come to represent a watershed in the history of Christendom, South Carolina style. On that night, Greenville, South Carolina - 'the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world' - served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church, no more free rides. The Fox Theatre went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. And that night, in 1963, the Fox Theatre won the opening skirmish.

Of course, the worldview battle began way before 1963, but in each progressive decade we can see a diminution of the relevance of God in public discussion and debate, and a relegation of Christ-centered theology to the sidelines of civic life. Thus, for congregations not otherwise part of a tradition that emphasizes the power of God seen and felt on a daily basis, talk of such a God can seem spooky and pre-modern. So, regardless whether unbelief began in 1963 or in the 1880's, how did it get started?

Augustine laid the foundations for the worldview that our culture has abandoned. His seminal thinking was based on the Bible and was made possible, oddly enough, by the forced 'Christianization' of the Western world by the Roman Emperor Constantine in the Edict of Milan in 313. Though there is fundamental problem for the larger church caused by Constantine's edict, a problem we have not yet addressed and barely recognize, the positive effect of the Edict of Milan was to legitimize Christianity, and this mainstreaming of the faith provided 'room' for Christian thinkers. Augustine was one of these people, and his writings set the stage for a worldview that lasted well into the Enlightenment. And, I'll argue, is the worldview to which we must return if we are to be effective in ministry.

Augustine believed that Christ had given us a certain knowledge that could be relied on more than that of the rational mind. He demonstrated that the Scriptures have value in that they show what Jesus did to open up the power of God to the church, and that the Scriptures fill in areas of truth that the rational mind can't ever discern on its own. Truth comes from God, and all human power (even the power of government) stems from God as well. Until well into the 19th century, Augustine's worldview provided the scaffolding upon which the props of civilization were hung and rearranged.

The beginning of the change came in the eighteenth century with a man by the name of Rene Descartes. He offered to build a world view on a different way of knowing, and a different power for living. His aim was to develop rules for gaining knowledge. He embraced the notion that one can use the rational mind to know everything. Though he believed he was exploring a totally new way of thinking, he was really exploring one already rejected by Augustine. Remember that Augustine said that there are areas of truth which the rational mind can never discern on its own. Descartes went in the opposite direction, believing that our rational mind can know all there is to know.

Now, it's interesting to note that Descartes was a Catholic Christian, and once wrote that his true purpose was to 'prove' the existence of God for the benefit of 'infidels.' Unfortunately, his rational approach to thinking led to some unexpected long-term results:

Because his method worked best in the material world, those who followed Descartes focused on material sources of power, and denied the spiritual (b) The rational mind became the trusted means of manipulating the material world, and the power of God became irrelevant (c) Though Descartes really wanted people to know God, his method of knowing God was rational, not relational; God was removed behind a plexiglas wall where He could be viewed from a distance. Descartes didn't show people

how to love God or how to communicate with Him. (d) As scientists trained in the Cartesian method explored the physical world, they became convinced that the world operates like a machine, and wonder and mystery evaporated; since natural laws could now be 'understood' by applying Descartes' method, modern science was born And because credible human witnesses were 'out-of-bounds' as a reliable source of truth, the witnesses who testified of Jesus Christ and the works of God in the Bible were put on the 'doubtful' list. Indeed, Descartes' method eventually led to the what is known as 'higher criticism' in the interpretation of the Bible, a movement that began in the 1880's.

A hundred years after Descartes, a man whose name you know applied the rational Cartesian methodology to biology as he traveled by sailing ship across the oceans of the planet. Charles Darwin supplied an extension of Descartes' worldview that fired the imagination of intellectuals from 1859 to the present day. From Darwin on, more and more scientists became convinced that evolution explained the powerful processes operating in the physical world, and that the rational mind could control these processes because we now were learning to understand them. God was unnecessary in this worldview, because with Darwin we had even arrived at an alternative way of explaining human origins.

Fifty years later, Sigmund Freud applied these worldviews to the study of the human mind. He believed that scientific work allowed human beings to discover something about the reality of the world through which we can increase our power and according to which we can regulate our lives. His influence on the helping professions can't be overstated. The power of God was outlawed in all fields of study, because it wasn't controllable. Freud openly wrote about the desirable decline of religious belief, because he thought that any reliance on credible witnesses was in opposition to rational proof. Today, well over 90% of all therapists use some methodology with deep roots in Freudian psychoanalysis. The people we tend to go to when we are in crisis mostly don't believe in the power of God.

Karl Marx applied Descartes to political philosophy. He wrote that communism abolishes eternal truths, abolishes all religion, and abolishes all morality. How can one have moral absolutes when there is no higher authority? He believed that capitalism emerged as a result of the Enlightenment, which itself was founded on the rational principles of Descartes. But capitalism is corrupt because it enslaves people and unfairly distributes wealth. So, using rational thinking exclusively, Marx reasoned that the next social evolutionary step was communism, in which humans, now not restrained by the fear of God nor the expectation of another life, would give themselves willingly to a society with equality and fairness.

Of course, Marx missed the central point that human beings, without God, lose value. If we are not made in the image of God, if we are not of value because God made us, then we can be fodder for the utilitarian goals of the state. Marx and his anti-God communism pushed the envelope of unbelief open a bit wider. Though we'd argue that communism either never existed in its pure form, or simply failed entirely, its theme of unbelief became another block in the building of the secular society we have today.

A few minutes ago I mentioned the term, 'higher criticism.' One of the most famous scholars in this movement among Christian thinkers was Rudolph Bultmann. He and his fellows placed the Bible under the glaring lights of scientific analysis. Higher criticism is the attempt to apply Descartes' method to Biblical studies. The assumption is that science is based on a more powerful and a firmer sort of knowledge than the mere word of God. Therefore, the Bible must be sifted until the rational mind comes up with the 'real truth of history.'

Bultmann and the Christian scholars of the higher critical movement analyzed the Bible and determined that somewhere within the Gospels were the words Jesus probably spoke, but clearly He couldn't have said most of what the Bible purports He said. They reasoned that the authors of the Bible took what little Jesus had to say, and changed His words and adapted His words to fit their needs as they built the church. Since Jesus had authority for Christians, the early church piggy backed their need for control and uniformity of belief by adding to the Jesus words their own words. So what people need to do today is to remove the artificially created 'mythology' which the early church added in, to get at the pristine and pure words of Jesus.

Along the way, Bultmann argued that we must trust our rational minds rather than the power of God. So when the Bible in the Old or New Testament would talk about the mighty works of God, like Moses passing through the Red Sea upon dry ground, or the virgin birth, or the physical resurrection of Jesus, any one can see that these events couldn't really have happened, because the power of God can't be rationally discerned. Rational people can't trust in faith, or in credible personal witnesses, because a rational person knows that the laws of nature are never violated. Thus, higher criticism outlawed the power of God as a presupposition. And, of course, if you decide ahead of time you won't believe in the power of God, you won't see the power of God in the Bible, in creation, or in your own life. And so our Western world rejects the power of God, rejecting miracles as something in which intelligent people do not believe.

This is a brief overview of how unbelief began, a sketch of how we came to the place where we are today. I hope it's not been boring because … there's more to come. Next week I'll show you how unbelief has affected the church, and why we must go back at least to Augustine if we want to have the power to minister effectively to a culture sliding into depravity. For the message that the Reformers of the Reformation borrowed from Augustine still applies today: Only God can save us, and faith in the power of God, acted out visibly in His church, is what the church offers the world. The federal, state and country government can do a better job at being a social service agency than we can - they have more money, and more people trained to the specific task. What they don't have, and we do have, is the power of God. The power of God, acted out visibly in this, His church, is precisely what the church can offer the world. But if we abandon that faith, bedazzled with the husks of scientism and New Ageism and modern spiritualism, we will end up bereaved of everything.

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